The First Chapter of "Little Dorrit" Overture to the Novel

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THE FIRST CHAPTER OF *Little Dorrit* is at first perplexing — its relevance for the rest of the novel seems only marginal. It appears much inferior to the other clearly brilliant first chapters of Dicken's mature period, such as *Bleak House*, whose first chapter has been aptly described by Morton D. Zabel as an overture to the novel. It is rather the admirable third chapter of *Little Dorrit* which has usually been singled out for comparison. Yet one perceptive critic has remarked that the first chapter is "a magnificent piece of Dickensian bravura,"[1] and another has viewed it as "a perfect microcosm of the entire novel, both thematically and structurally."[2] How vital and significant a chapter it is becomes evident when we focus on the bothersome questions pertaining to its relevance for the book. That, in fact, is my method in this paper: to ask and answer three such questions. First: why has Dickens chosen to set his opening scenes in Marseilles, and second, why has he found it necessary to introduce a minor character like Baptist, and Blandois-Rigaud, who appears to be merely the official villain of the piece, right at the start? The third question pertains to the very curious nature of the ending of the first chapter, its meaning and function. In seeking the answers to these questions, one is compelled to consider and reach important conclusions regarding the very essence of the book. It then becomes evident that the first chapter does, indeed, function as an overture to the entire novel.

Why Dickens chose to begin his novel not only with a long description of Marseilles but also with its villainous prison is a most pertinent question, for first images in his novels are invariably key ones, taking us immediately to the heart of the novel.

Dombey and Son, for example, begins with the picture of Dombey totally engrossed in the spectacle of his new-born son, oblivious to the presence of his lonely, miserable little daughter. Such a picture captures the essence of Dombey's two crucial filial relationships, and their integral connection with the one idea of his life. *Bleak House* begins with a picture of London, the fog and mud, and Chancery. Such a picture immediately points to Dickens having moved beyond the narrower concern with domestic relationships and the individual psyche to a wider concern with English society and its corrupt institutions, and their injurious effects on the individual and on England.

In similar fashion the first images of *Little Dorrit* prove to be key ones. The evocation of an inimical sunscape outside prison walls, and of vicious shade within, serves as a first indication that Dickens has further extended the circumference and scope of his subject-matter and concerns:[3] not London and England, but the entire "lower world" envisioned as a hellish prison. The opening description in which sun and shadow figure so prominently, startles the reader for it is not the traditional or usual Dickensian opposition of good and evil, where the sun is equated with light and life and shade with dark and death. Rather, it is the opposition of two evils, shade being the worse. To understand the full significance of "this puzzling but emphatically placed passage,"[4] two different but related aspects have to be considered: first, why the sun is so insistently painted as "burning, blazing, staring and oppressive,"[5] and second, what Marseilles has in common with London and Rome (the two other cities important for the novel).

Marseilles sweltering on a fiercely hot August day is, of course, strikingly different from the London both of the third chapter of *Little Dorrit*, and of the first chapter of *Bleak House*.[6] But it is only the climatic conditions of the two cities that are dissimilar, for it is their frightening alienation from a nature which has become an active enemy that is the vital point being made in both cases. Dickens' characteristic method of animating physical objects and personifying nature conveys this sense of hostility. Significantly, *Bleak House*'s second sentence is "[i]mplacable November weather." The smoke "lowers," the fog "creeps," it

lies out, it hovers, droops, cruelly pinches; the mud on which foot-passengers slip and slide, adding "new deposits to the crust upon crust . . . accumulating at compound interest," (p. 49)[7] appears a distinctly urban phenomenon. Similarly, the smoke from chimneys makes a black drizzle with its flakes of soot, and the fog is defiled where it rolls "among tiers of shipping and waterside pollution of a great (and dirty) city" (p. 49). To cap it all, the sun is dead. Thus in *Bleak House* Dickens (in modern fashion) shows how an abused nature becomes a foe to man. In *Little Dorrit*, where the opposite climatic situation prevails, the sun is by no means dead; it is "a blazing sun upon a *fierce* August day . . . Everything in Marseilles, and about Marseilles, had stared at the fervid sky, and been stared at in return, until a staring habit had become universal there" (p. 1).[8] A glaring whiteness instead of the London smoke, dust instead of mud; the landscape is parched and dry, eyes ache, labourers are exhausted. Activity is almost at a standstill; an implacable Nature has turned tyrant. "Everything that lived or grew, was oppressed by the glare," and the air itself is "panting." The sun is transforming the landscape into a fiery hell, burning everything it touches. Even the stones of "the quays had not cooled, night or day, for months" (p. 1).

Yet nature is not indiscriminately ferocious. Where man cannot abuse Nature, she is still beautiful and pure. Beyond the abominable black water of the harbour, the sea is blue and beautiful, a clear line demarcating "the point which the sea *would* not pass" (p. 1). But even this expanse significantly torments man.[9] The traders all seek any refuge or hiding place "from a sea too intensely blue to be looked at, and a sky set with one great flaming jewel" (p. 1). It is very beautiful and yet for man it is unendurable.

This first picture of *Little Dorrit* is, I would argue, an imaging forth of what we are explicitly told in *Hard Times*:

> But the sun itself, however beneficient generally, was less kind to Coketown than hard frost, and rarely looked intently into any of its closer regions without engendering more death than life. So does the eye of Heaven itself become an evil eye, when incapable

> or sordid hands are interposed between it and the things it looks upon to bless.[10]

This quotation comes from the middle part of the novel significantly entitled "Reaping" (following on the first part entitled "Sowing," and followed by a third — "Garnering") pointing up an ironic contrast between a normative pastoral morality associated with agricultural-rural imagery and the blighting corruption of an industrial-commercial city. The same ideas are picked up once again in *Little Dorrit* in Chapter Three, when Arthur Clenham compares the fresh, life-giving rain in the country to that of the city, which "developed only foul stale smells, and was a sickly, luke-warm, dirt-stained, wretched addition to the gutters" (p. 31).

Dickens, in many respects well within the tradition of the Romantics, depicts the city as an ugly hell upon earth. Its fiery connotations are emphasized by Arthur thinking about the scene beyond a London window:

> the old, blasted and blackened forest of chimneys, and the old red glare in the sky, which had seemed to him once upon a time but a mighty reflection of the fiery environment that was presented to his childish imagination in all directions, let it look where it would. (p. 38)

But in the fiery hell that is Marseilles it is the staring quality of earth, heaven and sea that torments man most, and very significantly stares him out of countenance, underscoring the nature of his condition: that of an alienated stranger. One cannot keep the stare out; one may close shutters, blinds and curtains, but "[g]rant it but a chink or key-hole and it shot in like a white-hot arrow" (p. 2). The stare is "obtrusive," insisting on seeing that which a human being would prefer to keep secret; like an arrow it penetrates or pierces that part of man that must be concealed.[11] It is "the eye of heaven" felt by man to be "an evil eye." Man's only apparent escape is to hide and block out the sun. He draws in upon himself, locks the world out — in short, retreats into a prison.

The validity of this reading may become all the more apparent if we examine the title of the first chapter "Sun and Shadow,"

pointing to the basic antithesis. The two words prove highly ambivalent, gradually reversing their initial connotations. At first, the sun is clearly hostile and destructive, and man is wretched and pitiful; therefore the shade, his only (self-made) resort appears positive. But once we move inside the prison, shade and exclusion of sun become utterly negative.[12] The prison is "so repulsive a place that even the obtrusive stare blinked at it, and left it to such refuse of reflected light as it could find for itself" (p. 2). The reader is made to feel the imprisonment of light as equivalent to the absence of life. The cold, damp and rot inside the prison are all the more powerfully evoked because the change from outside to inside the prison is presented as so extreme:

> A prison taint was on everything there. The imprisoned air, the imprisoned light... were all deteriorated by confinement. As the captive men were faded and haggard, so the iron was rusty, the stone was slimy... like a tomb, the prison had no knowledge of the brightness outside, and would have kept its polluted atmosphere intact in one of the spice islands of the Indian Ocean. (pp. 2-3)

Whatever the state of man outside, however exhausting the oppressive stare of the sun, man's state inside prison is far worse, and it is far worse precisely because here the sun refuses to penetrate. Shade then becomes synonymous with death, with "all that is a denial of freshness and growth."[13] The Marseilles prison is, however, an adumbration not only of the Marshalsea prison with its weedy-looking prisoners but also, as Hillis Miller has noted, of a whole series of "shadowed suffocating enclosure[s]"[14] such as the Clennam house, the Casby house, Miss Wade's dreary apartment in Calais, the Gowan house as well as the even more fashionable houses of the Merdles, Barnacles and Sparklers.

Shade and shadow thus turn out to be unambiguously evil. Yet in Chapter One, we are also told that to come out of the shade "was to plunge into the fiery river, [and] swim for life to the nearest strip of shade" (p. 2). This must appear a major contradiction unless we perceive that the fiery river is a crucial metaphor for Dickens' view of life in *Little Dorrit*. Throughout

the novel, life is depicted as a very wearisome, trying and arduous ordeal, where one's only really positive way is to plunge into that river and swim, resting from time to time, and then plunging back. In a dialogue very relevant to the present discussion, Daniel Doyce,[15] one of the most positive figures in the novel, serves as Dickens' spokesman for an explicit formulation of this single option. Clennam has remarked it was a pity Doyce ever began with his inventions since the Circumlocution Office blocks him at every turn with insurmountable obstacles to wear him out. He asks, "Hadn't . . . [a man] better let . . . [the invention] go?" and Doyce replies: "He can't do it. It's not put into his head to be buried. It's put into his head to be useful. *You hold your life on the condition that to the last you shall struggle for it*" (p. 185).

It is, however, an agonizing course, and there is, moreover, no guarantee of success. In a letter to Forster written at approximately this time, Dickens writes: "It is better to go on and fret, than stop and fret."[16] Whether this more negative formulation is closer to the spirit of *Little Dorrit* than Doyce's or not, it does state in simple terms the two basic ways of confronting life in the novel: one can swim in the fiery river, or one can give up or think one can afford not to struggle. Then one spends one's time "lounging and lying wherever shade . . . [is]" (p. 2). These are, in fact, the two possibilities open to William Dorrit when he first enters the Marshalsea:

> [c]rushed at first by his imprisonment, he had soon found a dull relief in it. He was under lock and key; but the lock and key that kept him in, kept numbers of his troubles out. If he had been a man of strength of purpose to face those troubles and fight them, he might have broken the net that held him, or broken his heart; but being what he was, he languidly slipped into this smooth descent, and never took a step upward. (pp. 63-64)

We are, furthermore, specifically told that William Dorrit is only one particular variant of a much more universal process of spiritual deterioration consequent on coming to see prison as a refuge. The only people not so threatened are those whose character is strong enough to put up a purposeful struggle. Prison or shade is ironically an insidiously perilous form[17] of self-defence

for man seeking to combat the evils of the world. Living has indeed become an actual punishment; yet, and this is one of the major points of the book, man's adopting a negatively passive course must, perforce, exacerbate his condtion.

Life appears so frightening partly, as we have seen, owing to man's sense of alienation in a hostile, menacing universe. Yet the world of *Little Dorrit*, so familiar in some respects to the modern mind, is nonetheless not the godless, modern wasteland. The alienation of so many of the characters is not due to their agnosticism or lack of faith but rather to their perversion of God and His Creation. Dickens shows that it is man's false values and false apprehension of himself, of God and of his relations with that God and with other men, that have contributed to making the world a hellish prison.

Marseilles, a commercial harbour, stands for a representative creation of a sick, materialistic civilization. Dickens stresses both the fact that Marseilles' traders come from all over, and the corrupt nature of those traders: "Hindoos, Russians, Chinese, Spaniards, Portuguese, Englishmen, Frenchmen, Genoese, Neapolitans, Venetians, Greeks, Turks, descendants from all the *builders of Babel*" (p. 1). The reference to the builders of Babel is no mere rhetorical flourish. Babylon is a traditional symbol of an arrogant civilization whose great technical and commercial advances in no way compensated for a cultural and spiritual barrenness. The Babylonians were corrupt, luxurious, imperialistic, cruel, and Babylon, the city of gold, the city of depravity, was destroyed overnight. Dickens' reference is thus a first hint of his critique of the civilization of his time, as well as a presage of its doom. Moreover, "the builders of Babel" is also an allusion to the tower of the earlier Babylonians (Sumerians). The destruction of Babel, is, therefore, a very obvious instance of God's punishing man for his presumption, iniquity and corruption; for not living as God intended him. Man has not only changed his own image, but has also sacrilegiously made gods in that new distorted image.

Precisely this sin is singled out by Dickens when attacking Mrs. Clennam:

> She still reversed the order of Creation, and breathed her own breath into a clay image of her Creator... [N]o human eyes have ever seen more daring, gross and shocking images of the Divine nature than we creatures of the dust make in our likenesses, of our own bad passions. (p. 754)

It is no accident that Dickens say this apropos of Mrs. Clennam, and that his second allusion to the builders of Babel is, likewise, in connection with her and her religion (she is another world-trader with counting-houses in China and London):

> Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, was a prayer too poor in spirit for her. Smite thou my debtors, Lord, wither them, crush them; do Thou as I would do, and Thou shalt have my worship; this was the impious *tower of stone she built up to scale Heaven.* (p. 45)

Mrs. Clennam is another Miss Barbary. What is new about her is that she is a woman of commerce. Her god is both the god of wrath and the supreme money-changer who can be bargained with. For Mrs. Clennam all relationships, even with the Almighty, are a business transaction; conversely all her hard bargains are a form of divine justice. Since Mrs. Clennam is in many respects a representative member of society, through her we see the common ground "thousands upon thousands" find between religion, commerce and justice.

But Mrs. Clennam's construction of religion also provides the missing link between spiritual pride, a totally false world-view and the notion of prison and perdition. According to her outlook, man is evil and so "the earth is expressly meant to be a scene of gloom"; it is a condemned world. Therefore, "[r]epression, punishment and fear" (p. 753) are regarded as wholesome. Prison in fact appears to her as man's natural, even normative, condition. Mrs. Clennam was brought up in this way, and too sick to perceive her true state, she condemned her husband, Arthur's mother and Arthur to a similar fate: through her we see the perpetuation of this state. But her perverted religion is not noticeably different from institutionalized religion, and London on a Sunday evening is very clearly an extension of the Clennam household (see Chapter Three). Imprisonment, therefore, of one kind or another, real or metaphorical, is undoubtedly a universal

phenomenon in the book. When Dickens has Baptist, a prisoner in Marseilles, draw a map on the pavement of the prison cell, and say:

> 'Toulon . . . Spain over there, Algiers over *there*. Creeping away to the left here, Nice . . . eh! there's no room for Naples;' he had got to the wall by this time; *'but it's all one; it's in there.'* (pp. 5-6)

His "in there," when uttered in prison, sounds ominous enough in the context of *Little Dorrit*.

The powerful evocation of Marseilles on a burning hot August day in the first chapter is a prelude to the London of Chapter Three and the Rome of Book Two, suggesting a hellish civilization where prison appears to have become second nature to man. This does not mean, however, that prison is the ineluctable fate of every single individual. The strong, right-thinking, right-feeling people can struggle, and attain a measure of freedom and redemption. As always in Dickens, the kind of option open to an individual depends not only on his character, but also on his relations with others. The nature of human relationships in the lower world of prison is dramatized in the first chapter by the two prison-inmates Blandois and Baptist. This, it seems to me, is clearly the answer to my second question: why Dickens found fit to begin his novel with these two characters — the much disparaged villain of the piece, Blandois (Rigaud), and a minor character, Baptist Cavaletto. The question of their relevance and introduction at the outset of the novel is solved as soon as we perceive that theirs is a three-fold function: first, their relationship embodies a key one in the novel; second, as the antithesis of each other, they represent the two major camps of characters in the novel; third, they stand for the two diametrically opposed ways of living one's life.

Blandois and Baptist are forced into a relationship by their being prison-mates in a single cell. While the authorities may make no distinction between a murderer and a minor smuggler, the men themselves make the distinction: the division of society into "gentlemen" and "servers" (or to use Blandois' more graphic appelation "pigs"), and they fall naturally into these

two classes. Dickens uses the Marseilles prison as he does the Marshalsea, to suggest how such a social hierarchy, based on false social and moral claims, comes about. There are always those men who have an inborn or inherited belief in their own superiority, or who understand that playing the gentleman is a profitable game, or, as in Blandois' case, it may be a mixture of both; these men by insisting they are gentlemen and, therefore, on their right to privileges and deference by virtue of their station, get what they claim.[18] And then there are always those who as naturally accord the former those rights, and not only seem to offer no resistance or raise any objections, but are instinctively subservient and humble. Blandois makes this quite clear:

> "Have I ever done anything here? Ever touched the broom or spread the mats, or rolled them up, or found the draughts, or collected the dominoes, or put my hand to any kind of work?"
>
> "Never".
>
> "Have you every thought of looking to me to do any kind of work? . . .
>
> No! You knew from the first moment when you saw me here, that I was a gentleman?"
>
> "ALTRO!. . . .
>
> "Ha! Ha! You are right! A gentleman I am! And a gentleman I'll live, and a gentleman I'll die. It's my intent to be a gentleman. It's my game. Death on my soul. I play it wherever I go! . . . Here I am! . . . Shaken out of destiny's dice-box into the company of a mere smuggler . . . and he instinctively recognizes my position, even by this light and in this place. It's well done! By Heaven! I win, however the game goes". (pp. 9-10)

There could be no gentlemen if there were no humble servers: each is necessary for the existence of the other. This is a foreshadowing[19] of William and Amy Dorrit's relationship, of Dorrit's relations with the Chiveries, with the other "Collegians," and with Nandy, the Plornishes' old father. William Dorrit gradually grew into the role of Father of the Marshalsea by playing the same game as Blandois, making capital of his pretensions as a born gentleman. Dorrit is, of course, a much more subtle and brilliant exploration of this phenomenon. The Gowans

— mother and son — play different variants of the same game with the Meagles; Mrs. Merdle tries her own version on Fanny Dorrit but the latter refuses to be a docile server, and at the price of her own humanity, forces Mrs. Merdle to acknowledge her as a master-player. The Barnacles play the same game in public life and through them, in powerful fashion, Dickens extends the social circumference of his theme.

What we should notice in addition is that this is actually the HOW NOT TO DO IT game (p. 100) and for successful play, circumlocution is a principal rule. Each player invents his own particular rhetoric. Blandois' variant, as we discover in the first chapter, is to parade himself as proud, sensitive, brave, frank, born to govern, thus laying claim to a spurious social and moral worth. The nature of the game is beautifully summed up by the Sparkling Barnacle: "A little humbug, and a groove and everything goes on capitally if you leave it alone" (p. 718). Blandois' humbug resembles Mrs. Merdle's, and both William Dorrit and his daughter Fanny have their distinctive brands, as has Mrs. Clennam and Mr. Casby the patriarch. All of these use language which is notable for its false rhetoric and moral cliché to deceive others and gain something thereby. But just as frequently they are trying also to deceive themselves: to hide ugly truths from themselves behind a barrage of words and circumlocution. What all these characters are really doing is subscribing to a picture of the world expressed most clearly in the last encounter Blandois is forced to have with Arthur Clennam: "Society sells itself and sells me, and I sell society" (p. 730).

Dickens launches his novel then with a character like Blandois because he is the crudest, most blatantly obvious specimen of a whole species. This murderer of his wife[20] is purely evil, so evil in fact that an innocent child, the daughter of the jailer, immediately senses it and draws back "with evident dread," "her fair brows roughened into an expression half of fright and half of anger."[21] The reaction of the jailer's daughter to Baptist is pointedly the opposite from what it was to Blandois. She is confident with him, and caresses his face when he kisses her hand. His essential good nature and gentleness, the way he picks up the refrain of the song her father begins, feeling "it a point of honour

to reply," reveals him as the true gentleman despite his status and station, in direct contrast to that false gentleman Blandois. In the same way as Blandois prefigures all those characters for whom the ruling fault is a will to status,[22] so Baptist prefigures the characters who are their opposites: Daniel Doyce and Amy Dorrit. His very name — John Baptist — is clearly symbolic.

The relationship between Blandois and Baptist is analogous in yet another important respect to the William and Amy Dorrit relationship. Baptist is like Amy in self-effacing goodness, kindness and an ability to make the best of a bad situation. Both Baptist and Amy are even referred to as little birds in a cage. Again and again Baptist's ability to make do, no matter how wretched his circumstances, is stressed. The prison has not tainted him radically. His very appearance makes this clear. He has "a *lively* look for a prison. [He is] a *sunburnt*, quick lithe little man" (p. 6). He is like a clock and always knows instinctively what time of day it is and where he is. He can eat whatever is his portion, and what is even more important, is made contented by a creative imagination. We may see this already in Chapter One from the way he cuts his meagre loaf of bread into various shapes and says, in reply to Blandois' question how he finds his bread:

> "A little dry, but I have my old sauce here" . . .
>
> "How sauce?"
>
> "I can cut my bread so — like a melon, or so — like an omelette, or so — like a fried fish. Or so — like Lyons sausages. . . . " (p. 8)

Later in the novel, when he arrives at Bleeding Heart Yard:

> Solitary, weak . . . he went with the stream of his fortunes in a *brisk* way that was *new* in those parts. With little to eat, and less to drink and nothing to wear but what he wore upon him . . . he put as bright a face upon it as if he were in flourishing circumstances. . . . (p. 294-95)

Within a short time he astonishes Pancks by being one of the few tenants who can pay his rent, and does so with a smile.

Dickens makes certain that Baptist is recognized as a simpler version of Doyce, as they are the only two men who work imag-

inatively with their hands. Trouble is even taken to associate Baptist with Doyce. Baptist finally finds a home in Bleeding Heart Yard where Doyce has his works, and Baptist does odd jobs for him. But his chief employment is "carving with the aid of a few tools in the blithest way possible!" and Mrs. Plornish remarks: "he turns out to have quite a power of carving them flowers that you see him at now" (p. 297). Apart from the flowers he carves, his picking up the jailer's song, also significantly about flowers, shows he is an artist-figure who gives pleasure, aesthetic and emotional, albeit of a rudimentary kind.

An artist even of very modest proportions like Baptist has a beneficial effect on those around him by creating things of beauty, and giving pleasure. We should remember our first picture of London and the miserable Londoners to whom the pleasure or the relief provided by pictures, unfamiliar animals, plants and flowers, etc. is denied so that there is "nothing to change the brooding mind or raise it up" (p. 29). Similarly we recall the ugliness of the Clennam house and its adverse effects on the mind. The centrality of this theme in *Hard Times* is also evidence of its significance for Dickens' vision of life at this time.[23] There is, therefore, much to be said for Lionel Trilling's argument for the crucial role of Daniel Doyce, the creative mind, in Dickens' scheme.[24] Henry Gowan, his antithesis, and embodiment of the false artist, clarifies, as has been frequently noted, even further the qualities characterizing the true artist.

Through Baptist, the link between Daniel Doyce and Little Dorrit becomes more tangible. They are all three creative in the sense that they attempt to improve or make more tolerable and dignified the lives of others. They try neither to brood themselves nor can they bear to see others brooding, but actively strive against adverse and paralyzing conditions. Dickens himself explicitly makes this point. "It is enough that she (Little Dorrit) was inspired? Yes. Shall we speak of the inspiration of the poet or priest, and not of the heart impelled by love and self-devotion to the lowliest work in the lowliest way of life?" (p. 70).

Baptist, as the simplest and therefore most clearly comprehendible positive character in the novel, embodies a whole complex of attitudes absolutely vital in a world where the only ten-

able mode of existence, as I have endeavoured to show, is to plunge into the fiery stream and swim for life. These attitudes have as a necessary correlative a whole set of personal attributes, and a character like Baptist, who possesses them, is thus able to dramatize the HOW TO DO IT WAY. Blandois, at the opposite pole, possessing neither the requisite attributes nor outlook, exemplifies the opposite way of making his journey through life. His HOW NOT TO DO IT WAY is naturally that of the majority of characters, and it is determined by commercial instincts so deeply imbedded ("Society sells itself . . . ") as to discolour all human relations. Miss Wade's words put it into a nutshell; people are travellers journeying to meet each other to have business with each other. Her notion of human relations as predestined evil transactions also characterizes, as we have noted, Mrs. Clennam's sick picture of human and divine relations.

All these people who have embraced THE HOW NOT TO DO IT WAY are the permanent prisoners who can only incarcerate or break themselves and others. They are the ones chiefly responsible for the world being the way it is — a fiery hell. But for the small minority of characters represented by Baptist in this chapter, the need for freedom, the will to live as man was intended (by Dickens' lights) is strong enough to achieve not only a measure of freedom but also to cast a ray of light for others, and gain thereby peace and salvation for a small number. This seems to me what Dickens is suggesting already at the very curious end of the first chapter, and explains the sequence of three very distinctive pictures with which the chapter closes. (This is the third and final question to be considered in this article.)

The first of the three pictures is one of Baptist left alone in his prison cell; he goes into a state of frenzy, like a "caged animal," leaping and running around, clasping the grate and trying to shake it. The second picture is that of the same Baptist, immediately afterwards, lying down, his passion short-lived and spent, soon fast asleep. The third and last picture is one of idyllic beauty and calm of evening.

As I understand the purpose and order of these pictures, Baptist's fit of anguish and wild attempt to wrench open his prison gate is the vital attempt of the human spirit which will not resign

itself to imprisonment.[25] Baptist, unlike William Dorrit, belongs to the category of men previously referred to (p. 6) whom Dickens tells us either have their hearts broken or break out of the net. What saves him from a broken heart is his nature which enables him first to discharge his pent-up anguish, and then rest and get a healthy sleep. He does not brood or eat his heart out. But later we will watch Arthur Clennam, who, also unlike William Dorrit, belongs to this second category of men, and see the process of the breaking of the noble spirit. His will, however, was crippled initially, as he himself tells us in the next chapter, and he lacks Baptist's sunny temperament. Baptist, as pointed out earlier, represents the simple, uncomplex case. But Baptist is Dickens' example, presented at the outset, of the kind of man capable of "breaking the net," and Arthur has to learn to do the same.

The final picture of peace is the last and complementary part of Dickens' affirmative answer to the fiery hell painted at the beginning of this chapter.

> The wide stare stared itself out for one while; the sun went down in a green, golden glory; the stars came out in the heavens, and the fire-flies mimicked them in the lower air, as men may feebly imitate the goodness of a better order of beings; the long dusty roads and the interminable plains were in repose — and so deep a hush was on the sea, that it scarcely whispered of the time when it shall give up its dead. (p. 14)

Dickens shows us the lower world before the Day of Judgement (when the sea shall give up its dead) and the only haven — the world of nature where and when man's abuse of it is arrested, and the only goodness possible — the feeble imitation of the goodness of a better order of beings. Baptist, as the prefigure of those who achieve such a limited goodness, enjoys a rest which is a paradigm of the kind of rest attainable. This final description of the world at peace[26] presents a vision to be repeated towards the end of the novel, with its Christian-Romantic imagery even more strongly pronounced:

> The beauties of the sunset had not faded from the long light films of cloud that lay at peace in the horizon. From a radiant centre over the whole length and breadth of the tranquil firmament,

> great shoots of light streamed among the early stars, like signs of the blessed later covenant of peace and hope that changed the crown of thorns into a glory. (p. 771)

The builders of Babel are sorely punished and are tormented even by the flaming jewel in the sky, but the blessed covenant of Christ's redemption of man offers him eventual salvation and a resurrection which promises freedom from the wearisome toil of life and its evils.

This accords with the actual ending of the novel and the image of Amy and Arthur at the altar, standing in the reflected light of the sun "shining on them through the painted figure of our Saviour" (p. 801). The newly married couple obviously have their part in Dickens' vision of the Covenant. Their happiness, as Mr. Church correctly emphasizes, is not "mere optimism," but it is not the "triumph of ordinariness"[27] as he contends, nor a "deliberate modification of the harsh alternatives of the book's beginning."[28] The lost are lost, and for this very reason "a modest life of usefulness and happiness" (p. 801) is no ordinary achievement in the novel (or out of it). For the few genuine strugglers in the book, some possibility of contented, constructive togetherness and some kind of freedom are imaginable, but they clearly do not change the world. It continues to be a hell for the great majority of HOW NOT TO DO ITS. For them there is no escaping the vicious circle of futility and irreversibility that Rupert R. Roopneraine argues is characteristic of life in the novel.[29] But in contradistinction to the mechanical rotation of such lives, the HOW TO DO IT people move in a linear direction in keeping with the Christian scheme of things.

The structure of the first chapter is likewise linear, analogous to the movement of the whole novel: first, the picture of a burning, fiery hell, second a powerful description of a villainous prison and its two inmates, succeeded by a vision of an angelic child visitor, followed by the credo of a highly unprepossessing false gentleman and a study in the relations between such a gentleman and a humble server; then we have the history of that gentleman's marriage of convenience and his destruction of another human being (his wife), followed by a moving description of a caged man's anguish, succeeded by a picture of the rest

he finds, and lastly, a vision of the repose of the world when nature can become benevolent: an overture in short to the entire novel.

NOTES

[1] Peter Church, "The End of Good and Evil," *Dickens Studies Annual*, (Carbondale & Edwardsville: South Illinois UP, 1977), No. 6, p. 146.

[2] R. Rupert Roopneraine, "Time and the Circle in *Little Dorrit*" in *Dickens Studies Annual* (Carbondale & Edwardsville: South Illinois UP, 1974), No. 3, p. 58. There is, in addition, A. E. Dyson's chapter in his book *The Inimitable Dickens: A Reading of the Novels* (London: Macmillan, 1970).

[3] Cf. Church, p. 149.

[4] Jerome Beaty, "The 'Soothing Songs' of *Little Dorrit*: New Light on Dickens' Darkness," in *Nineteenth Century Perspectives: Essays in Honour of Lionel Stevenson*. Ed. Clyde de L. Ryals. (Durham: N.C.: Duke UP, 1974), p. 223. While Mr. Beaty remarks that it is a strange way to begin a novel "whose dominant image is alleged to be prison," and while he notes the strange use of the sun, he never gives us any direct or explicit answers to the questions he implicitly asks.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] J. Hillis Miller notes that *Little Dorrit* repeats, with differences, many themes and symbols of *Bleak House*, and, we may add, of *Hard Times*, the novel between these two. However, Miller sees Dickens as concerning himself with the universal condition of man in all times and places, whereas I argue that Dickens has his own civilization in mind. See J. Hillis Hiller, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1965), p. 228.

[7] *Bleak House* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1980).

[8] *Little Dorrit* (Oxford: OUP, 1979). The italics in the quoted texts throughout this article are my own.

[9] Cf. Dyson, p. 204.

[10] *Hard Times* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), p. 85.

[11] Dickens' description of the church as freest from the white hot arrow has provoked a wealth of commentary. To my mind there can be no doubt but that it is an implied criticism of the church. The twilight of the church appears attractive enough, but the depiction of the permanent visitors is distinctly negative. It is dreamily peopled "with ugly old shadows, piously dozing, spitting, and begging." The church is a refuge for people strikingly like the debtors of the Marshalsea, and the related themes of hypocrisy and illusion are already being glanced at. See Beaty, p. 230, n. 13.

[12] See Dyson, p. 207.

[13] H. M. Daleski, *Dickens and His Art* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), p. 220.

[14] Miller, p. 225.

[15] Doyce's first name is Daniel, and if we take into account the references to Babylon it does not seem too far-fetched to see an allusion to *The Book of Daniel*, and Daniel in the burning furnace.

[16] Quoted in Forster's *Life*, vol. II. (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1966), p. 198.

[17] See Church: "For Little Dorrit insensibility to pain is a deadly lure" (p. 142).

[18] Cf. Church, p. 140.

[19] Cf. Roopneraine, p. 58.

[20] Marriages of convenience are particularly noticeable among these various characters who are characterized by a selfish (self-aggrandizing) will; the wretchedness and even destruction of the other party (of the marriage) is a recurrent motif. Blandois' mercenary marriage of convenience and murder of his wife, is, as Ross H. Dabney has pointed out, only one representative, though extreme, instance. *Love and Property in the Novels of Dickens* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967), p. 120.

[21] See Dyson who has pointed out that the jailer's daughter prefigures Amy Dorrit, p. 209.

[22] Lionel Trilling, "*Little Dorrit*," *Dickens: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. M. Price (Englewoods Cliys, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 152.

[23] See Miller, p. 230.

[24] Lionel Trilling, p. 157.

[25] Dickens' protest against the kind of prisons that Marseilles is typical of may also be seen from his introductory description of the two inmates of this prison. He refers to both Blandois and Baptist as "vermin", the seen vermin in contrast to the unseen. Dickens also refers to the dwellers of Tom All Alone's in *Bleak House* as vermin. For Dickens, people forced to live in such "villainous" conditions are reduced to some such sub-species. Yet Trilling and Mr. A. O. J. Cockshut both argue that one of the functions of Blandois is to complicate our response to prisons. If people like Blandois exist, prisons are necessary. That may be, but what both critics fail to take into account is that Blandois is not only acquitted when he is patently guilty, but the Court also takes a great deal of trouble to spirit him out of Marseilles lest he be lynched. Such scrupulosity on the part of Justice, I would suggest, is only one of Dickens' ironies about the grand injustice of Justice. The devil goes free, despite public opinion, whereas people like Baptist are left to languish in prison, and Clennam can never discover the nature of the Circumlocution Office's dossier on Dorrit. It is not a question so much of whether prisons are necessary or not, but whether the kind of prisons portrayed *in Little Dorrit* are instances and even actual metaphors for the evil man does to man. And to my mind, that is their precise function.

[26] Cf. Beaty, p. 236.

[27] Church, pp. 148-49.

[28] Church, p. 127.

[29] Roopneraine, p. 75.